



A Strategic Vision Needed to Tap the Hidden Potential of Andaman & Nicobar Islands

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

A senior IAS officer, Sanat Kaul has had two important stints in Nicobar Islands. First, as deputy commissioner from 1975 to 1977, and again as chief secretary, Andaman and Nicobar Islands from 1991 to 1993. It was during these postings that Kaul gathered an in-depth insight, what he calls their "untapped strategic assets". During his distinguished career in civil service, Kaul has held several crucial appointments in the Union Government. He is an alumnus of London School of Economics from where he secured his Master's degree in Economics. He also did his Ph.D from the University of London. He retired from the service in 2007 and now lived in Delhi.

Sanat Kaul has analytically tried to highlight the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in this rather elaborate study. By delving into a wide range of sources, backed by his own rich personal experience, the author gives a bird's eye view of the Islands. By tracing their history, he tries to focus on their true potential. His emphasis is on how to make the islands economically vibrant that will also simultaneously enhance their strategic importance. Kaul traces the geopolitical importance of these Islands vis-à-vis the Straits of Malacca that is not only a crucial sea lane of communication but also is of vital importance for China since its oil imports are channelled through this region.

India, he feels, can have a dominant edge in this area whose potential currently lies dormant. India could have a strategic edge over China if these Islands are developed both as naval and airbases. Their commercial vitality is equally important and the Islands could be developed into important commercial hubs.

Taking a hard look at India's New-Look-East Policy, the author spins a narrative that talks about India having a Forward Policy in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. He feels that 'the strategic location of these Islands needs to be developed as a springboard for power projection in the region using both hard and soft power to complement each other. The author feels that the harbour in Kamorta Island (which is in the Nancowry group of Islands in Nicobar district) would make a great naval base and needs to be operationalised urgently. His thesis is that the military might of India needs to be expanded and linked with economic development that will greatly enhance India's capabilities in this vital region.

The soft power of India that the author talks about can be achieved by increasing its economic clout in this part of the world. This can be achieved by developing the tourism potential of these islands. He would like India to create world class eco-tourism resorts in order to attract well heeled tourists from around the world. This, he feels, will change the perception in the world about India's dominance in this region. However, he cautions that Andaman's fragile ecological system should not

Andaman and Nicobar Islands – India's untapped strategic assets

By Sanat Kaul

Published by Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses

PP: 206, Price Rs. 995/-

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be disturbed. Concerns are also voiced on the security front which has been the bugbear of India's strategic planning all these years. These are a dampener which goes a long way in hindering tourism development at a frenetic pace which the author is advocating.

He now makes the point that the Look-East Policy initially spelt out by the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, and now brought into prominence by the present regime can position Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a focal point. The idea is to convert these Islands from just an outpost to a vital springboard for enhancing India's Strategic power in this part of the world. As India enhances its economic strength, its outreach increases. The thesis of the author is that India's strategic presence is further enhanced by increasing its soft power primarily through upgrading its infrastructure to give a boost to tourism.

He traces the roots of the Indian government's Policy in the Andamans through the ages and advocates that the past policy of benign neglect and its more advanced versions of greater connectivity to the mainland should change. In his words "Leverage the location and use the Islands as strategic assets for benefit of the Islands and the country". This he grandly calls 'the strategy of Leveraging the Potential of the Islands. He rounds off the book by calling for developing a philosophy and strategy for Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He feels India should take advantage of these Islands location near the South East Asian countries and enhance sea and air connectivity with them that will bring them closer to India.

His final prescription is to have a Special Tourism Plan and open up the Islands. 'In his words a strategic master plan needs to be redrawn for this purpose after taking into account the various environmental and strategic concerns integrating the civil and military requirements and merging it with India's Look-East Policy of 1991'.

Sanat Kaul, an IAS officer, uses his experience of having worked both in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and also in Arunachal Pradesh and comes out with interesting conjectures. Just as the Indian government transferred the erstwhile NEFA into Arunachal Pradesh in the 1950s and the 1960s with a new administrative set-up. With the thrust of the 'Forward Policy', the new state's jurisdiction was extended up to the McMahon line. The various tribes settled there were integrated without impinging upon their traditions and culture.

New infrastructure in the form of roads, schools and hospitals was created with generous support from the Union Government. This has buttressed India's jurisdiction in the area despite China's claims of suzerainty over the region. A similar approach is also needed in the Andamans that will enhance India's paramountcy in the region.

However, the scenario painted by the author will be rather difficult to implement in the immediate future but will have to be evolved gradually over a period of time. The Chinese presence in the region is expanding and any attempt by India to pursue a 'Forward Policy' without adequate preparations may meet a similar fate as the ill-starred adventure in the Himalayas in 1962. The naval and air presence of India has to be greatly enhanced to showcase India's strength in the area. Similarly, a lot of infrastructure has to be put in place before the Andamans becomes a fancied tourist destination and have its rightful place under the tropical sun. It has to compete with Phuket, Bali and Singapore which are light year ahead.

Sanat Kaul has shown a long term vision which India should build on and tap its dominant strategic assets in South East Asia and emerge as a strong player in this part of the Indian Ocean. This will require a grand strategic vision and enormous amount of capital. Laws will have to be changed so that the Islands are opened up to investment and infrastructure is rapidly developed. In a word, it will require swift action and enormous funds to make this a reality. If the past is any guide, this vision will take a long time to fructify.
